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OPINION

How can closed societies be opened up?

By Orrin G. Hatch

THE National Endowment for Democracy is undertaking an ambitious project: fostering the growth of democratic principles abroad. The endowment's congressionally funded mandate is especially challenging in communist countries where independent activity is systematically suppressed by the government. And yet, even the most skeptical critic would not argue that all communist societies are the same. Some systems are more open than others.

Different strategies will need to be used in different countries. For instance, in countries that are undergoing civil war, Soviet émigré Vladimir Bukovsky has pointed out that we should focus on supporting resistance movements directly. Moscow is at present safe from this option. On the other hand, in more stable closed societies the overall goal is to increase the level of "openness" and to foster independent public opinion. One important component of this process is Western recognition of independent writers, artists, scientists, etc.

The truth of the matter is that no one knows precisely what will work and what won't. On the whole, however, I am optimistic about the long-term prospects for fostering pluralism in communist countries. I recently sent a representative to a conference sponsored by the Andrei Sakharov Institute on this very subject. Some of the possibilities that were suggested at that conference include helping the families of political prisoners and facilitating a wide dissemination of information about communist countries — both inside communist countries and in the West. For instance, experts on the Soviet Union tell me that the average Soviet citizen does not even have a map of his own country! I understand that small-scale maps of the USSR are considered classified by the Kremlin. We need to do what we can to destroy the "cloak of secrecy" that hides information from citizens of communist countries.

Another suggestion that was raised at the Sakharov conference was that the United States should declassify as much information as possible about closed societies in order to defog the cloud of mystery. Of course, our national-security concerns come first. I believe this idea has merit, however, and should be further investigated. One candidate for possible declassification, in my view, is the excellent CIA weekly *Trends in Communist Media*, issues of which are now automatically declassified after six months.

I would also emphasize the importance of mail and telephone contacts between East and West. For instance, American children might initiate a "pen-pal project" with schoolchildren in China or the Soviet Union. In addition, the terms of future exchange programs should include an agreement that both parties will be able to communicate with each other via telephone and correspondence before, during, and after the exchange project. As a rule, Moscow allows only those people who will toe the party line to take part in exchange programs. For this reason, I advocate exchange programs of independent persons, including dissident writers, artists, and human rights activists.

Another way to help open up closed societies is to pay close attention to what Soviet government officials, journalists, and scholars are communicating to the Soviet public. For instance, Soviet children's magazines often focus on military themes. Military personnel are routinely pictured performing nonmilitary tasks such as helping elderly women, building houses, and planting trees. I have received one picture from a Soviet children's magazine depicting Army personnel building a house. This picture was forwarded to me by Mr. Arkady Polyshchuk, who is a graduate of Moscow University, a Soviet émigré, and an expert on this subject. I believe the Western world should object vociferously to the use of Soviet military propaganda for children by raising this issue at the United Nations and in other international forums.

One obstacle to opening up closed societies is that governments of most communist countries make a concerted effort to restrict contact between their citizens and Western tourists. For instance, there is a new Soviet law making it a crime to pass "official" information to foreigners. Of course, by Moscow's definition, even the price of meat could be defined as "official information." For this so-called crime, a Soviet citizen can be imprisoned for as long as three years.

According to Soviet experts, the Soviet leadership has been so successful at restricting and distorting the flow of information to the Soviet people that it has succeeded in convincing many Russian citizens that the United States is actively preparing for nuclear war! This illustrates the level of absurdity that pervades Moscow's internal disinformation campaign.

In the final analysis, there is one principle to follow in opening up closed societies: Encourage the free flow of information. This, in turn, will lead to the creation of independent thinking. And when independent-minded people band together for common goals, you have successfully planted the seeds for peaceful, democratic change.

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